

WHAT IS K9 NOSE WORK®?

By Dorothy Turley, CNWI, CPDT-KA

Simply put K9 Nose Work® is allowing your dog to do what he does best...use his nose to find things. I hesitate to tell people that we teach dogs to do this because the dog knows much more about this than we do and they are the teachers. We just allow them to do what comes easily and naturally. Best of all, they take us with them while they work. The activity/sport is different from most dog activities because the handler is not the one in control. The human does have work to contribute--making the area safe, setting hides, bringing equipment, transportation and such. But no human being can do the work for their dog. The handler's biggest job is to remove any obstacles that might inhibit the dog from using their best dog skill—their noses!

There are references out there that will give you more details (a few are listed below) but here are the nuts and bolts. When you attend a class you will start by having your dog search cardboard boxes for a treat or toy (a primary reward). Slowly you will increase the difficulty by changing the configuration of the boxes, adding distractions, changing the environment, etc. No matter what changes the dog always wins and finds the "hide" (treats or toy). It is very important that this process is done with each dog's individual abilities in mind. We are constantly shaping the dog to handle more levels of difficulty without any serious stumbling. This will get the dog in the game and build up his drive to hunt. By doing this slowly the dog's desire to hunt (drive) becomes very resistant to obstacles and distractions and increases the dog's ability to solve problems when hunting. And best of all, you and your dog will have great fun!

Many teams are happy to stay at this level of work. They find that it is great mental and physical exercise for the dog. This is especially true since there are almost no limiting physical factors for dog or human participation. Having a game that you can do almost anytime or anywhere with your dog will always be a very useful tool. But if you want to go on, the next level is to introduce the dog to hunting for an odor they would not naturally seek out. The three target odors we use are Birch, Anise and Clove (often called target odors). These odors were chosen because they are not overly common (like vanilla and cinnamon or aromatherapy oils such as lavender). They are also reasonably priced. Anise has been used for many years when training professional detection dogs so it was a natural for use in fun K9 Nose Work®. The odors are carried on cotton swabs that have been exposed to small amount of the essential oil. The swabs are generally held in small containers to avoid contaminating the environment. This introduction is done slowly and completely positively. The odor is paired with the dog's favorite reward (generally food or toy) so that the dog learns to love the odor as much as his favorite reward.

Eventually some will go on to competition with their dogs. In order to compete in NACSW® events, the dog must first pass an Odor Recognition Test (ORT) for the level they are competing. Other organizations have similar requirements or often accept an NACSW ORT title. An ORT would have 12 identical boxes in two rows. One of these boxes contains the odor hidden inside. The handler must tell the judge when the dog has chosen the correct box. Though it varies for each team the average time to train to be ready for each title level is approximately a year.

After passing Odor Recognition Tests, there are different levels of competition that involve different search elements (types or searches). The four elements are; a container search, an indoor search, an exterior search and a vehicle search. Each search area is separate and the dog will complete one element before going on to the other. There are also Element Specialty

Trials (ESTs) that will consist of multiple searches but only in one element. i.e. A Container Element Specialty will have 4 separate container searches.

The odors can be in a variety of places but there are guidelines in the rule book for each element and level of competition. The handler must be able to tell the judge when the dog has correctly located an odor and where it is located if the judge asks. Each type of search varies depending on the level at which the dog is competing. For example, a Level 1 vehicle search will have one odor hidden on one to three cars. Level 3 dogs will have to locate 1 to 3 odors on up to 5 vehicles. Vehicle hides for this sport are always on the exterior of the vehicle but not in plain sight.

There are many different types of scent work for dogs to do such as search and rescue, tracking and article work. Some are sports and some are more serious in their goals. In many ways there are no differences in what the dog does in each of these activities except what we train the dog to locate. Someone once said that a tracking dog is doing something like connect the dots and a Nose Work dog is playing "Where's Waldo?" This is a good analogy but the dog will use any technique in their toolbox to find a hide. The dogs that you see in the airport and at borders are doing very similar work to what our Nose Work are doing for fun. They have been trained to find specific scents and tell their handler when they have located one.

Due to the popularity of the sport there are many classes available. Even if you don't want to compete you might want to seek out a class with a Certified Nose Work Instructor (CNWI) or Associate Nose Work Instructor (ANWI). These instructors are endorsed and educated by the National Association on Canine Scent Work (NACSW) and follow the guidelines and philosophies of this organization. They have had to complete an educational curriculum with the founders and have met the criteria for certification (or are in the process of completing this). At a minimum your instructor should have attended some workshops given by the Nose Work founders (Ron Gaunt, Jill Marie O'Brien and Amy Herot). That is not to say that there are not many great instructors out there but if you think you may want to go on to get a title for you dog, you will want to have a good foundation with people who know the extra details that will help you be successful not only in competition but in all aspects of this fun activity. NACSW is dedicated to keeping the sport fun and positive for dogs and humans.

No matter what your goal, you and your dog can have great fun with K9 Nose Work®. You will see a side of your dog that will amaze and astound you and he will be so glad that you care about what has always been really important to him.

National Association of Canine Scent Work, LLC® (NACSW) (Sport rules, instructors, competitions) – www.nacsw.net
Information about K9 Nose Work (Workshops, instructors, shelter info and more) – www.K9nosework.com

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